

POLITICS / FEATURE / DECEMBER 15, 2016

This Political Theorist Predicted the Rise of Trumpism. His Name Was Hunter S. Thompson.

In Hell's Angels, the gonzo journalist wrote about left-behind people motivated only by "an ethic of total retaliation." Sound familiar?

SUSAN MCWILLIAMS

In late March, Donald Trump opened a rally in Wisconsin by mocking the state's governor, Scott Walker, who had just endorsed his Republican opponent, Ted Cruz. "He came in on his Harley," Trump said of Walker, "but he doesn't look like a motorcycle guy."

"The motorcycle guys," he added, "like Trump."

It has been 50 years since Hunter S. Thompson published the definitive book on motorcycle guys: *Hell's Angels: The Strange and Terrible Saga of the Outlaw Motorcycle Gangs*. It grew out of a piece first published in *The Nation* one year earlier. My grandfather, Carey McWilliams, editor of the magazine from 1955 to 1975, commissioned the piece from Thompson—it was the gonzo journalist's first big break, and the beginning of a friendship between the two men that would last until my grandfather died in

1980. Because of that family connection, I had long known that *Hell's Angels* was a political book. Even so, I was surprised, when I finally picked it up a few years ago, by how prophetic Thompson is and how eerily he anticipates 21st-century American politics. This year, when people asked me what I thought of the election, I kept telling them to read *Hell's Angels*.

Most people read *Hell's Angels* for the lurid stories of sex and drugs. But that misses the point entirely. What's truly shocking about reading the book today is how well Thompson foresaw the retaliatory, right-wing politics that now goes by the name of Trumpism. After following the motorcycle guys around for months, Thompson concluded that the most striking thing about them was not their hedonism but their "ethic of total retaliation" against a technologically advanced and economically changing America in which they felt they'd been counted out and left behind. Thompson saw the appeal of that retaliatory ethic. He claimed that a small part of every human being longs to burn it all down, especially when faced with great and impersonal powers that seem hostile to your very existence. In the United States, a place of ever greater and more impersonal powers, the ethic of total retaliation was likely to catch on.

What made that outcome almost certain, Thompson thought, was the obliviousness of Berkeley, California, types who, from the safety of their cocktail parties, imagined that they understood and represented the downtrodden. The Berkeley types, Thompson thought, were not going to realize how presumptuous they had been until the downtrodden broke into one of those cocktail

parties and embarked on a campaign of rape, pillage, and slaughter. For Thompson, the Angels weren't important because they heralded a new movement of cultural hedonism, but because they were the advance guard for a new kind of right-wing politics. As Thompson presciently wrote in the *Nation* piece he later expanded on in *Hell's Angels*, that kind of politics is “nearly impossible to deal with” using reason or empathy or awareness-raising or any of the other favorite tools of the left.

Popular

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Hell's Angels concludes when the Angels ally with the John Birch Society and write to President Lyndon Johnson to offer their services to fight communism, much to the befuddlement of the anti-Vietnam elites who assumed the Angels were on the side of "counterculture." The Angels and their retaliatory militarism were, Thompson warned, the harbingers of a darker time to come. That time has arrived.

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Fifty years after Thompson published his book, a lot of Americans have come to feel like motorcycle guys. At a time when so many of us are trying to understand what happened in the election, there are few better resources than *Hell's Angels*. That's not because Thompson was the only American writer to warn coastal, left-liberal elites about their disconnection from poor and working-class white voters. Plenty of people issued such warnings: journalists like Thomas Edsall, who for decades has been documenting the rise of "red America," and scholars like Christopher Lasch, who saw as early as the 1980s that the elite embrace of technological advancement and individual liberation looked like a "revolt" to the mass of Americans, most of whom

have been on the losing end of enough “innovations” to be skeptical about the dogmas of progress.

But though Thompson’s depiction of an alienated, white, masculine working-class culture—one that is fundamentally misunderstood by intellectuals—is not the only one out there, it was the first. And in some ways, it is still the best psychological study of those Americans often dismissed as “white trash” or “deplorables.”

Thompson’s Angels were mostly working-class white men who felt, not incorrectly, that they had been relegated to the sewer of American society. Their unswerving loyalty to the nation—the Angels had started as a World War II veterans group—had not paid them any rewards or won them any enduring public respect. The manual-labor skills that they had learned and cultivated were in declining demand. Though most had made it through high school, they did not have the more advanced levels of training that might lead to economic or professional security. “Their lack of education,” Thompson wrote, “rendered them completely useless in a highly technical economy.” Looking at the American future, they saw no place for themselves in it.

In other words, the Angels felt like “strangers in their own land,” as Arlie Russell Hochschild puts it in her recent book on red-state America. They were clunky and outclassed and scorned, just like the Harley-Davidsons they chose to drive. Harleys had been the kings of the American motorcycle market until the early 1960s, when European and Japanese imports came onto the scene. Those

imports were sleeker, faster, more efficient, and cheaper. Almost overnight, Harleys went from being in high demand to being the least appealing, most underpowered, and hard to handle motorcycles out there. It's not hard to see why the Angels insisted on Harleys and identified strongly with their bikes.

Just as there was no rational way to defend Harleys against foreign-made choppers, the Angels saw no rational grounds on which to defend their own skills or loyalties against the emerging new world order of the late 20th century. Their skills were outdated; their knowledge was insubstantial; their powers were inferior. There was no rational way to argue that they were better workers or citizens than the competition; the competition was effectively over, and Angels had lost. The standards by which they had been built had been definitively eclipsed.

We parents tell our children that when you know you've lost an argument or a race, the right thing to do is to be a good sport and to "get 'em next time." But if there is no next time, or you know that every next time you are going to be in the loser's lane again, what's the use of being a good sport? It would make you look even more ignorant, and more like a loser, to pretend like you think you have a chance. The game has been rigged against you. Why not piss on the field before you storm off? Why not stick up your finger at the whole goddamned game?

Therein lies the ethic of total retaliation. The Angels, rather than gracefully accepting their place as losers in an increasingly technical, intellectual, global, inclusive, progressive American

society, stuck up their fingers at the whole enterprise. If you can't win, you can at least scare the bejesus out of the guy wearing the medal. You might not beat him, but you can make him pay attention to you. You can haunt him, make him worry that you're going to steal into his daughter's bedroom in the darkest night and have your way with her—and that she might actually like it.

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It's not hard to see in the demographics, the words, and the behavior of Trump supporters an ethic of total retaliation at work. These are men and women who defend their vote by saying things like: "I just wanted people to know that I'm here, that I count." These are men and women whose scorn of "political correctness" translates into: "You can't make me talk the way that you want me to talk, even if that way of talking is nicer and smarter and better." These are men and women whose denials of climate change are gleeful denials of scientific expertise in a world where scientific experts have unquestioned intellectual respect and social status. These are men and women who seemed to applaud the incompetence of Trump's campaign because competence itself is associated with membership in the elite.

Thompson would want us to see this: These are men and women who know that, by all intellectual and economic standards, they cannot win the game. So whether it be out of self-protection or an overcompensation for their own profound sense of shame, they lash out at politicians, judges, scientists, teachers, Wall Street, universities, the media, legislatures—even at elections. They are

not interested in contemplating serious reforms to the system; they are either too pessimistic or too disappointed to believe that is possible. So the best they can do is adopt a position of total irreverence: to show they hate the players and the game.

Understood in those terms, the idea that Trumpism is “populist” seems misplaced. Populism is a belief in the right of ordinary people, rather than political insiders, to rule. Trumpism, by contrast, operates on the presumption that ordinary people aren’t going to get any chance to rule no matter what they do, so they might as well piss off the political insiders using the only tool left available to them: the vote.

While many commentators say Trump will have to bring back jobs or vibrancy to places like the Rust Belt if he wants to continue to have the support of people who voted for him, Thompson’s account suggests otherwise. Many if not most Trump supporters long ago gave up on the idea that any politician, even someone like Trump, can change the direction the wind is blowing. Even if he fails to bring back the jobs, Trump can maintain loyalty in another way: As long as he continues to offend and irritate elites, and as long as he refuses to play by certain rules of decorum—heaven forbid, the president-elect says ill-conceived things on Twitter!—Trump will still command loyalty. It’s the ethic, not the policy, that matters most.

Even the racism that was on full display in Trump’s campaign should be understood at least in part in retaliatory terms, as directed at the political elite rather than at struggling minority

groups. The Hells Angels, Thompson wrote, did things like get tattoos of swastikas mostly because it visibly scared the members of polite society. The Angels were perfectly happy to hang out at bars with men of different races, especially if those men drove motorcycles, and several insisted to Thompson that the racism was only for show. While I have no doubt (and no one should have any doubt) that there are genuine racists in Trump's constituency—and the gleeful performance of racism is nothing to shrug off—Thompson suggests we should consider the ways in which racism might not be the core disease of Trumpism but a symptom of a deeper illness.


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Thompson would also direct our attention in the early days of the Trump administration to the armed forces and the policies that will mandate what they do. For one great exception to the Angels' ethos of total retaliation against authority was the military, just as one great exception to the Trump voters' ethos of total irreverence is the police. Thompson explains that such institutions, which are premised on brute force rather than the more refined rules of intellectual engagement, maintain both a practical and a cultural connection to people like the Angels. The military and the police draw mostly from poor and working-class communities to fill their ranks, and their use of violence is something the motorcycle guys understand. It is one aspect of American life they can easily imagine themselves being a part of.

For his part, Thompson thought that what might prove most dangerous about the ethic of total retaliation was the way it encouraged the distrust of all authority—except for the authority of brute force. The president-elect's enthusiasm for waterboarding and other forms of torture, his hawkish cabinet choices, and his overtures to strongmen like Vladimir Putin are grave omens. We could end up back where Thompson left off at the end of his book: the Angels, marching with the John Birch Society, on behalf of the Vietnam War.

At the end of *Hell's Angels*, having spent months with the motorcycle guys, Thompson finally gets stomped by them. For some offense he doesn't understand (and which he probably didn't commit), Thompson gets punched, bloodied, kicked in the face and in the ribs, spat at and pissed on. He limps off to a hospital in the dead of night, alone and afraid. Only in that moment does Thompson realize that as a journalist (and therefore a member of the elite), he could not possibly be a true friend of the Angels. Wear leather and ride a motorcycle though he might, Thompson stood on the side of intellectual and cultural authority. And that finally made him, despite his months of good-timing with the Angels, subject to their retaliatory impulses. The ethic of retaliation is total, Thompson comes to realize. There is nothing partial about it. It ends with violence.

There's no doubt about it: trouble lies ahead. That *Hell's Angels* foresaw all this 50 years ago underscores the depth and seriousness of Thompson as a political thinker and of ours as a singularly dangerous time. Trumpism is about something far

more serious than Trump, something that has been brewing and building for generations. Let us take Thompson's cautions seriously, then, so that this time we Berkeley types are not naive about what we face. Otherwise, we're all liable to get stomped. 

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